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SUBJECT: LEGISLATORS REHASH RECALL AT BOSTON GROUP MEETING

Classified By: Abelardo A. Arias, Political Counselor, for reasons 1.4
(B) and (D)

Summary

1. (C) Both pro-GOV and pro-opposition National Assembly Deputies meeting with Codel Ballenger August 3 predicted victory in the August 15 referendum to unseat President Hugo Chavez. According to various deputies, participation of uncommitted voters, particularly in poor and rural areas, will make or break the recall. Legislators from both camps expressed concern about violence following the referendum, but many discounted widespread, systematic violence. Pro-GOV Deputy Hector Vargas told Emboff the GOV had a renewed interest in the Boston Group based on hopes for improved US-Venezuelan relations following the recall and US presidential elections. Vargas claimed a group of legislators complained about the incarceration of opposition Baruta Mayor Henrique Capriles Radonsky, but were rebuffed by GOV leaders. End Summary.

Ballenger Honored for Boston Group Efforts

2. (C) Members of the Boston Group and the Ambassador honored Rep. Cass Ballenger for his work creating and sustaining the group of US and Venezuelan legislators the Residence August 13. The Ambassador gave Rep. Ballenger the flag that flew at the Embassy that day and praised his efforts to build bridges between the US and Venezuelan and between the political parties of both countries. Representatives Bill Delahunt and Gregory Meeks, and National Assembly Deputy Calixto Ortega also spoke.

Recall Speculation Runs Rampant

3. (C) Speaking with Emboff, Pro-GOV Deputy Hector Vargas predicted a relatively easy win for President Hugo Chavez against the August 15 recall referendum. He acknowledged, however, Chavez supporters "could" lose his home state of Zulia. He told Emboff that even with an "unprecedented" low 25 percent abstention rate, the opposition would not be able to mobilize enough voters to remove Chavez. Although he conceded the opposition has the numbers "on paper" to defeat Chavez, he predicted they would fail to motivate them due to lack of a clear, symbolic leader and the indecisiveness inherent in an organization that relies on consensus. He claimed this contrasted favorably for the GOV with Chavez's strong, single-minded leadership in the minds of uncommitted Venezuelans.

4. (C) Opposition Deputy Leopoldo Martinez told Emboff he was concerned voters in poor neighborhoods might sit the recall out because the opposition has not done enough to offer them a clear alternative to Chavez. He said the GOV's well-funded campaign blitzkrieg is engulfing voters in poor areas with pro-GOV banners, songs, and events, making a pro-Chavez outcome seem inevitable and the risks of voting against the GOV appear pointless. He added that a less visible GOV campaign is underway using neighbors to intimidate voters, insinuating that they should vote to keep Chavez "if they know what's good for them." He complained that the opposition was "not doing enough to reassure these people" that they will be protected or that they have a reason to participate.

Wide-Spread Violence Unlikely, Says Opposition Deputy

5. (C) Opposition Deputy Angel Vera agreed with GOV-allied Saul Ortega and several other deputies who expressed concern about, but ultimately discounted, the possibility of wide-spread violence following the recall. Vera said whatever the outcome of the recall, the military could be

trusted to keep the peace. Although top leadership was firmly pro-Chavez, he asserted the rank and file represented a broad cross-section of Venezuelan society. Because Chavista elements are present, there will likely be isolated

examples of military heavy-handedness, but these will not be representative of the larger situation, which will be peaceful. He claimed the opposition largely underestimates the military's sense of professionalism and its underlying disposition to stay out of politics.

How Venezuela-Cuba Relationship Is "Good" for US

16. (C) Deputy Vargas later criticized the US "fascination" with the GOV's relationship with Cuba, claiming it was no more important to the GOV than its relationship with Colombia or any of its neighbors. He also proposed that the US should encourage the Venezuela-Cuba relationship, as Venezuelan is "having more of an influence on Cuba" than Cuba is having on Venezuela. He said the thousands of Cuban professionals sent to Venezuela to participate in GOV social programs (largely Cuban doctors participating the "Barrio Adentro" medical program) are exposed to US values and viewpoints through contact with Venezuelans, and that the expatriates acted as a sort of Trojan Horse for US interests upon returning to the island.

17. (C) Pro-GOV Deputy Luis Acuna blasted the Venezuelan medical establishment for complaining that the GOV was supporting the "Barrio Adentro" program at the expense of medical clinics. Acuna asserted medicine shortages and under-funding of clinics was a chronic problem that predates the Chavez administration and complained that only 29 of 13,000 doctors participating the "Barrio Adentro" program were Venezuelan. "Venezuelan doctors do not want to work if they cannot have air conditioning and cable TV," Acuna said.

GOV Can't Back Away From Capriles Case

18. (C) Vargas also expressed dismay at the imprisonment of Baruta Mayor Henrique Capriles Radonsky, a "friend" and colleague when both men were deputies in the 90s. According to Vargas, a handful of GOV legislators complained to the prosecution about the incarceration, but were slapped down by GOV leadership. He lamented that the case was out of control and that it would be difficult for the GOV to back away from it without losing face. Although he admitted the incarceration may have made a martyr out Capriles and boosted his support, he predicted that would not matter "when he is convicted," since convicts cannot run for office.

Renewed Interest in the Boston Group

19. (C) Saul Ortega told Emboff that GOV-allied legislators were taking a renewed interest in the Boston Group because of potential new directions in political leadership in both countries following the recall referendum in Venezuela and the presidential elections in the US. He emphasized the deep Venezuelan social and economic ties with the US that will endure "regardless of who the (Venezuelan) president is." Ortega claimed the GOV was hoping a new "respectful" and "less interventionist" US foreign policy would emerge toward Latin America, even if the current administration stayed on.

Comment

110. (C) This event was symbolic of the importance of the Boston Group and vindication of the efforts of Boston Group architect Cass Ballenger. Getting pro-GOV and opposition legislators together in a social setting is always desirable, especially less than two weeks before the polarizing recall vote. Although legislators from both sides confidently predicted an outcome in their favor, they also seemed to be thinking beyond August 15 to efforts to constrain violence. The underlying message: the aftermath of the recall may be more divisive and potentially violent than the recall itself. Shapiro